



# Senate Press Office

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## **EDITORIAL**

For Immediate Release:  
September 11, 2008

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# Nuclear Fuel is an Integral Part of Energy Independence

By State Sen. Ross Tolleson (R-Perry)

The recent “green living” movement seems to be picking up speed everywhere. To some, reusable grocery bags and annual “green” issues by popular magazines may seem a fad, but people are taking notice of the immediate need to preserve and protect our environment. In order to “live green,” some investment must be made. Insulating a home to lower energy costs, replacing lights with energy efficient bulbs, even purchasing a reusable grocery bag all require a financial investment. These investments go toward the long term goal of preserving the environment. The same can be said for nuclear energy. While nuclear energy sparks debate over upfront costs, the long term benefits make it a worthwhile investment.

My last column called for Congress to develop a roadmap for energy independence that includes a diversified energy portfolio. An important component to achieving a sustainable and successful energy plan is nuclear energy, which accounts for about 20 percent of the U.S. supply of electricity.

In a rapidly-growing state such as Georgia, large-scale energy generation is essential to keep up with increasing economic and energy demands. In a report released in July by Forbes, Georgia's projected annual Gross State Product growth is 3.2 percent, seventh-best in the country. The Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI) affirms that while Georgia must meet the needs of a growing economy, we must be sensitive to the poor air quality that plagues certain regions of our state. One solution to that dilemma is nuclear energy, which provides large energy outputs without harmful emissions.

Georgia is already harnessing the benefits of nuclear energy. As of 2006, one-fourth of Georgia's electricity was powered by nuclear energy. Our state is home to two nuclear plants – Plant Vogtle near Waynesboro, and Plant Hatch near Baxley in southeastern Georgia. According to the Energy Information Administration (EIA), as of January 2005, Georgia ranked ninth among the 31 states with nuclear capacity. This shows that we are already safely producing alternative energy through these plants, and have the potential to increase their output. Georgia Power owns a large part of both nuclear plants, with Plant Vogtle ranked 35<sup>th</sup> on NEI's list of the 100 largest utility plants in the U.S., according to 2003 data. In an effort to increase the state's nuclear output, Georgia Power is seeking state and federal approval to build two new 1,100 megawatt nuclear reactors at Plant Vogtle. Last month, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission released its evaluation of Vogtle's permit, citing that there are no environmental impacts that would prevent issuing the permit. The agency is expected to make a final decision by late 2009.

A major concern with nuclear energy is the upfront costs associated with building a power plant. We have had success in Georgia on lowering such costs, as Plant Vogtle had the fifth-lowest cost in the U.S., according to NEI. Also, nuclear plants have significantly lower fuel and operating costs than fossil fuel plants. We are in tight economic times and I understand that it is imperative to tighten the belt and reduce spending. But that does not mean that we should stop investing in our future. The return on investment of a nuclear power plant will be reaped by our children, grandchildren, and their grandchildren.

The recent demand for nuclear is being driven by rising gas prices and expected state and federal caps on greenhouse gas emissions. As Chairman of the Senate Natural Resources and the Environment Committee, I am working to implement policies that will create a cleaner and healthier future for Georgia. Our state's electric industry was ranked the ninth highest in carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions

in 2004. That carbon dioxide may be a direct result of our climate change. Polluted ozone contributes to smog, leading to asthma attacks and respiratory impairment in young children and the elderly. By using an alternative fuel source that does not produce harmful emissions, we can help keep everyone healthy. We cannot put a price on our environment's health, or our health.

Waste disposal is another issue we must consider when discussing nuclear power plants. While there still is no permanent disposal method for such waste, the good news is that Georgia is one of five states with licensed spent fuel storage facilities. Used nuclear fuel is safely stored on-site, then is transported by the federal government to the repository site in Yucca Mountain, Nevada. Environmental impact studies conducted by several government agencies show that 120,000 metric tons could be stored at the site. Currently, nuclear power plants are storing approximately 55,000 metric tons of used nuclear fuel on-site. If these fuel rods were stacked on top of each other, the stack would be only the length and width of a football field and less than 10 yards high. The U.S. does not currently reprocess spent nuclear fuel, but the federal government is researching advanced technologies for the reprocessing, or recycling, of spent nuclear fuel.

We are facing a serious depletion of our energy resources. Nuclear energy and other alternatives are becoming increasingly essential. I have called upon Washington to build a roadmap for America's energy future, which is getting one step closer with Senator Saxby Chambliss' recent Energy Reform Act proposal. I applaud Sen. Chambliss' efforts in encouraging Congress to take the first step in moving forward on a comprehensive energy plan. This doesn't need to be business as usual for Congress. This is an important bill for America, and does not need to get caught up in the gridlock of politics. What I want to see is a transparent energy package that doesn't emerge from the political process looking like a Christmas tree filled with garbage ornaments.

The only way to achieve a clear, transparent energy bill is through the involvement of constituents just like you. Familiarize yourself with the proposed energy package and decide for yourself what you think is best for your country. Then keep the pressure on Washington by contacting your U.S. senators and representatives to encourage them to pass a clean, effective bill. Regardless of your political affiliation, we can all agree that this is not a Republican or Democratic issue, this is an American issue.

**State Sen. Ross Tolleson (R-Perry)**

Chairman, Senate Natural Resources and the Environment Committee

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*Sen. Ross Tolleson serves as Chairman of the Natural Resources and the Environment Committee. He represents the 20<sup>th</sup> Senate District which includes Bleckley, Dodge, Johnson, Laurens, Pulaski, and Telfair counties and parts of Houston and Wilcox counties. He may be reached by phone at 404.656.0081 or via e-mail at [ross.tolleson@senate.ga.gov](mailto:ross.tolleson@senate.ga.gov).*